**India-Pakistan War of 1971**

Since achieving independence from British rule in 1947, the South Asian nations of [India](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) and [Pakistan](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) have both experienced extreme tension, leading to bouts of violence and trauma. One of the most dramatic and long-lasting periods of overt war—the third of the [India-Pakistan wars](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan)—arose in 1971. That war emerged from long-standing ethnic and social tensions created by the legacy of British [imperialism](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) and the partitioning of South [Asia](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) into two separate states. It also resulted in the creation of a third nation, [Bangladesh](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan), and represents a continued wound in relations between India and Pakistan, due to the bitterness and brutality of the conflict.  
  
Like most world conflicts, the roots of the India-Pakistan War of 1971 lay in a variety of camps. When the British relinquished their imperial rule over India in 1947, they partitioned the country and created two new nation-states, India, with a majority Hindu population, and Pakistan, with a majority Muslim population. As a result of partition, a conflict developed over which country the vast population of Muslim Bengalis would join. Separated by a large land mass of predominantly Hindus, the Muslims of Bengal became part of Pakistan, which was divided into two regions, West Pakistan and East Pakistan.  
  
With its noncontiguous regions interrupted by more than 1,000 miles of Indian territory, Pakistan emerged as a nation that was socially and politically bifurcated. With control of the federal capital, Islamabad, and four strong provinces, West Pakistan—composed of such populations as the Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashtun—rose to prominence over the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan. Separated by distance, ethnicity, and language from their compatriots, the people of East Pakistan felt increasingly marginalized from West Pakistan as the decades ensued, especially with respect to economic development and access to political power. Ironically, the population of East Pakistan greatly outnumbered that of West Pakistan, sowing the seeds for conflict that would lead to the India-Pakistan War of 1971.  
  
In 1970, the devastating Bhola cyclone—the deadliest storm in world history—decimated East Pakistan, causing over half a million deaths and making millions homeless. Great resentment among Bengalis developed when the government in West Pakistan failed to meet popular expectations for recovery efforts. In the wake of that discontent, the [Awami League](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan), an East Pakistani opposition party with a separatist platform, won a simple majority in the Pakistani parliamentary [elections](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) of March 1971. However, the West Pakistani leader, [Zulfikar Ali Bhutto](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan), prevented the Awami League from taking power. Bhutto declared a general strike, and when talks between the East Pakistanis and the West Pakistanis broke down, [martial law](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) was declared, marking the beginning of the Bangladesh Liberation War.  
  
In the wake of violence in East Pakistan precipitated by the West Pakistan Army, East Pakistanis in the military declared their province independent on March 26, 1971, calling the new country Bangladesh. The Awami League established a government in [exile](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan), a move supported by India. Meanwhile, West Pakistani troops began massacring civilians in the newly formed Bangladesh, causing a mass exodus of more than 10 million Bangladeshis into eastern India. Already engaged in the Pakistani conflict, the government of India now stepped up its role in the Bangladesh liberation movement, enraging Pakistan and further escalating tension.  
  
In the context of the Cold War, the [United States](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) had been a supporter of Pakistan, while India had been a leader of nonalignment, or the lack of alliance with any major power bloc. During the Bangladesh Liberation War, the United States supplied Pakistan with [munitions](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) and supported its campaign against those in Bengal who had declared independence. Meanwhile, the millions of [refugees](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) flooding into India from Bangladesh created tremendous turmoil. Despite the rising tension in India, the country's prime minister, [Indira Gandhi](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan), actively supported Bangladeshi independence.  
  
In autumn of 1971, Gandhi negotiated with [France](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) and the [United Kingdom](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan), earning their support for Bangladeshi independence, a humiliation to the United States. Moreover, she signed a 20-year cooperation treaty with the [Soviet Union](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan), an act that assured that [China](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) would not invade India in the case of war with Pakistan, despite its alliance with the Muslim nation. This new political alignment with the Soviets and India's ability to garner British and French support was a direct affront to U.S. foreign policy.  
  
By November 1971, India was overtly funding the Bangladeshi resistance forces and building up massive troop installations along its borders with East Pakistan. Both nations prepared for war, but the Indians waited for a deep snow to block the Himalayan Mountains, preventing the possibility of Chinese intervention. Meanwhile, the Pakistanis decided that they would launch a preemptive strike on India, hoping to achieve the same success that [Israel](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) had achieved against its Arab enemies when it launched a successful preemptive strike in the [Six-Day War](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) of 1967. On December 3, 1971, Pakistani air fighters launched aerial attacks on eight of India's airbases in the northwest, near the disputed territories of Kashmir. That event came to be known as the India-Pakistan War of 1971.  
  
Unlike Israel, Pakistan was met by an enemy that had anticipated its preemptive strike and had the firepower necessary to destroy it. Quickly, the Indians achieved air superiority, then launched a counterstrike against Pakistan in the east. Uniting Indian military troops with guerrillas engaged in the struggle for Bangladeshi independence, the Indians launched an air, land, and sea offensive against Pakistani troops in East Pakistan.  
  
The Pakistanis invaded western India, hoping to gain land that could be used to barter for territory in East Pakistan at the war's end. However, the Indian Army both prevented Pakistan from taking Indian territory in the west and also conquered more than 5,500 square miles of Pakistani territory. That encroachment was a tremendous blow to Pakistan and its war effort, which was quickly falling apart. In addition to land attacks, India launched successful sea attacks on the port of Karachi, proving its naval prowess in the Indian Ocean.  
  
Pakistan's failures in the war were accompanied by brutal West Pakistani violence against Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan. Thus, much of the international community turned against Pakistan. Nevertheless, the United States continued to support Pakistan, despite knowledge of those [atrocities](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan). The United States even sent the USS*Enterprise*to the Bay of Bengal, although legislation had prohibited aid to Pakistan. The [Richard Nixon](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) administration hoped to normalize relations with the People's Republic of China by supporting Pakistan. To that end, the Nixon administration actively ignored, and perhaps even supported, the violence Pakistan unleashed on Bangladesh, in order to bring China into its [sphere of influence](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan).  
  
The presence of the nuclear-powered USS*Enterprise* in the Bay of Bengal further escalated the Cold War. Indira Gandhi perceived the presence of the ship as a threat and called on the Soviets to support her. In compliance with the newly signed cooperation treaty between India and the Soviet Union, the Soviets dispatched two nuclear-armed warships to the Bay of Bengal. The Soviet ships engaged in a standoff with the [U.S. Navy](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) until January, a situation illustrating clearly the way that the Cold War operated in a variety of smaller theaters of war throughout the world.  
  
Despite U.S. support, the Pakistanis were incapable of defeating the Indians and the Bangladeshis, and on December 16, 1971, Pakistani forces in Bangladesh surrendered. The India-Pakistan War of 1971 was over, but at a great cost. Bangladesh achieved its independence and was now ranked as the third most populous Muslim country in the world. However, a vast number of its population had been killed and displaced in the struggle for independence. Although figures are debated to this day, most believe that at least 2 million people were killed, while another 10 to 15 million were displaced as a result of the violence.  
  
Pakistan was also devastated by the war. Along with the elimination of a majority of its population with the loss of East Pakistan, the military [infrastructure](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) of the nation was decimated. At least half of its navy was destroyed, along with one-third of its army. The air force was also hit hard, with at least one quarter of its planes destroyed. Moreover, India took more than 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war, with the intention of trying each of them for war crimes in the wake of the brutalities in Bangladesh. However, they were eventually released in an effort to defuse further tensions between these South Asian neighbors.  
  
For India, the events of 1971 also proved challenging. Absorbing the mass exodus of Bangladeshis was a primary factor in the serious financial and political crisis for the country, and its overtures toward the Soviet Union were a dramatic retreat from its long history of nonalignment. For many observers, the India-Pakistan War of 1971 was as much a battle between Cold War [superpowers](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) as it was a battle between warring neighbors with a shared imperial past. Although the Cold War has ended, tensions between India and Pakistan remain high, forcing the entire world to watch as more than 1 billion people struggle for [hegemony](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/934338?terms=India+and+Pakistan) over South Asia.